

From breadwinner to bedridden Vulnerable tales of a labor migrant household in Italy

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Abstract: Within transnational labor, the working capital of migrants may recoil as aging and disability occur, crushing people's everyday life and aspirations. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork with Indo-Pakistani minorities in Brescia, northern Italy, the author queries "a case for affliction," seeing the experience of a breadwinner's stroke disrupting his household. While for decades Punjabi diasporas have settled abroad remitting to the homeland, social attainment often remains precarious for first-time movers and their offspring. After 20-year residence in a destination country, a migrant father's collapse rebounds on his kindred, who regrettably turn to local welfare and public housing but also readjust personal desires toward sustainable family care. Intersectional analysis abets the participants' narratives in challenging any set "sense of inequality," embodied, and embedded in run-of-the-mill racialized capitalism.

Keywords: Brescia, dis-ability, family upheaval, Indian diaspora, labor migration, livelihood disruption, public housing, urban ghettoization

To Param and his family, with dear esteem.
'cause I haven't found another way yet, to pay back the trust bestowed.

Kiran and I have become friends out of his sustained involvement in my research on "home and migration." While I got used to visiting his family home, this is the first time he offers to put me up for the night. . . . His aged parents are away: they have returned to India to winter out, until the Italian spring will lure them back again.

(Field notes. Brescia, January 2018)

Starting from my close ethnographic collaboration with a 1.5 generation migrant informant (a young male native of India, now a naturalized Italian citizen), I will go backward in time, exploring the memories of his transnational family and the crucial moments of their collective emplacement in the industrial district of Brescia: a multicultural urban milieu in northern Italy. This article delivers a critical account of a family story, following the vagaries of my friend's father, a Punjabi first-time migrant who moved to Italy in the nineties, and of his left-behind household who joined him 12 years later. One critical event, the stroke that the householder suffered two decades after re-



location, when his children were just “coming of age,” altered the household cycle on multiple levels. Facing the loss of their livelihood, this nuclear family pulled through as fast and as well as possible with regard to income, housing, and care. While the worn and wounded body of the *paterfamilias* testifies to his years of toil in precarious conditions as a migrant laborer, his wife and offspring, who had relocated amid trying circumstances, were left to counteract the unforeseen, trying to make the present livable and the future imaginable. Drawing from the accounts rendered by different members of this household over three years of ethnographic collaboration, the article unravels the node between home and vulnerability by looking at the everyday efforts of a migrant family in bouncing back from adversities and recovering a sense of home, notwithstanding structural violence and social inequity. Despite being settled and naturalized for years by the time I met them, the chronic precariousness (Han 2018) of this domestic group was still evident in their living conditions based on their single income (partly spent in remittances and partly on paying the rent in the urban belt), which added up to their relative racial segregation as Indian immigrants in Italy. The intrinsic vulnerability of bodies and homes, as well as their subjection to harm and the resultant need for care and mending, will be explored from the current flat allocated to this impoverished household by the social services. The material conditions of their dwelling make the setting and metaphor of an everyday, uneven family drama where migration plans became stuck under one roof (Gielis 2011). With the sudden loss of a breadwinner, how do the local welfare institutions intervene and how do once-dependent family members redistribute their roles of authority and control, responsibility and care?

Going behind closed doors to understand the hastening of life trajectories upon reaction to an unintended stoppage, the following four sections descend into the routine of a household as its members develop strategies for resilience (Humphrey 2008). The ethnographic narrative

runs chronologically from past to present, but it also incorporates memories and projections, flashbacks, and yearnings. Specifically, the first paragraph relates the migration journey of Kiran’s father and his early residence in Italy as a single male laborer up to applying for family reunion. The second section breaks through the everyday struggles of an immigrant family reunited in Italy with the violence of their father’s momentous disability, arguing that such a medical incident makes a case for *affliction* (Das 2015): a critical event in which social marginality may exceed the resources of a domestic group for responding to individual illness and livelihood disruption. The third section opens up to the wider scale of interplay between house and home, also taking a design and material culture approach, to see how aspects of certain city planning and spatial segregation affect (and ostracize) people living in public housing blocks in the urban belts. The final section moves toward a provisional conclusion reasoning on longitudinality in ethnographic research and on the ethical dilemmas of following an informant’s life course, through thick and thin (Behar 1996). Although this article considers the dwindling housing pathways of a migrant family, after the great promise of a transnational housing career (finding a decent place here in the country of arrival, and building a grand remittance house back in the homeland), it is the organicist figure of the household as a complex body that allows for minute anthropological reflection. Deteriorating bodies and ontological/political frailties coexist in the life narratives of a labor migrant family, and yet, all kin members emphasized their striving to preserve the survival of the household, with variable affordances and engagements, in the search of a paradoxical “homeostasis”: recovering an equilibrium other than pathological. There’s little space for romanticizing the notion of home in the household drama here discussed, but there is enough to recognize the skillful tenacity of a nuclear kin in making their home on the move as safe as it can be, in a taxing social environment where multiple challenges unfold out of the grand

narrative of “working capital” in a competitive global economy (Buck et al. 2002). In particular, labor migrants pursue their ambition to relocate elsewhere by means of the (more or less skilled) work they are capable of performing. What is crucial to success and social achievement when migrant working capital no longer works? Rather than being locked within one immigrant housing story, this article reconstructs people’s domestic lives in disparate times and spaces in order to bear witness to their critical engagement with vulnerabilities. Beyond the appropriate anonymization of my interlocutors, it is our dialogue that I wish to put forth for public recognition, acknowledging the mediation of ethnographic empathy and its limits.

Betting one’s life at the world’s end

(Post)colonial migrations are deeply embedded in the social history of the Indian subcontinent; once the British *Raj* collapsed and independent states were formed from the vast territories of the former empire, consolidated and novel migration routes sprang up. In modern times, the descendants of bonded laborers became contemporary economic migrants, as free as the global market could make them. In the Punjab, this phenomenon took a further incidence, due to the recurrent *pogroms* that the Sikh minority endured until the eighties. By the time the Indian state opened up to neoliberalism, a mounting number of prospective migrants were trying their luck by moving to Europe, often armed with aspirations and networks, but lacking regular documents or capabilities other than their manual labor and proverbial work ethic (Jacobsen and Myrvold 2011). Any argument that the Punjabi region has developed a peculiar culture of emigration must take into account that most of those who have moved away (and continue to) have not come from the utterly dispossessed. It was from the ranks of the lower middle class, often landholders risking bankruptcy in a countryside gone fruitless (after the intensive farming sponsored by the government in the sixties),

that young males—the bachelor first sons of a small landowning household—took the plunge (Thapan 2013).

Provided these migrants’ journeys were quite hazardous (entering with a travel visa and then overstaying, or departing altogether without regular means, oftentimes aided by lucrative passeurs or scam middlemen known as *dalals*, see Joseph 2016), once the immigrant reached their destination country, a struggle began for survival and permanence on the territory in spite of threats of expulsion. Their preliminary search for home, in material and symbolic terms, meant finding some lodging and a work contract toward a (long-term) permit to stay. Italy repeatedly applied the legal device known as the “Flows Decree,” instituting an amnesty for irregular migrants to remain in the country upon certain conditions that hinged on their productivity (an informal job at first, transitioning into the on-the-record job market, sponsored by their own bosses). Because of their apparent cultural habitus with farming, Punjabi immigrants are reported to have been hired in itinerant circuses first, then vegetable picking, and are also said to have been particularly sought after as cattle breeders and dairy farmers in the plains of Central and Northern Italy. As many authors have described in observing the aims and outcomes of transnational economic migration, there exists a status paradox in low middle-class citizens from some parts of the Global South who bet their lives on a move to somewhere in the Global North, where their livelihood often starts (and for many, persists) below the local poverty line (Nieswand 2014). Pursuing a new middle-class status—or, at least, the maintenance of some old social privileges amidst the tumult of a rural economy in decline and the emergence of an urban elite—contemporary migrations from the Subcontinent merge diaspora movement with transnational labor, both searching for betterment (Lal and Jacobsen 2015). In northern Italy, which has been a target destination for Punjabi migrants since the late eighties, persecuted Sikh exiles and labor migrants (from both sides of the India–Pakistan border) used to fol-

low the same modes and routes in order to enter the local workforce (Bonfanti 2016; Thapan 2013). Their able bodies were the capital with which to work out their plans for settlement.

The Italian labor market and its racialized industry workforce

Param's experience of settling in Italy partly follows the script just described: he left Punjab indebted to an acquaintance from his village who had already transited hundreds of locals to "greener pastures." Twenty-eight years old at the time, Param did not find entry into the Italian labor market easy; by 1992, the Indian community already settled in the country had also established a quite exploitative system for informal recruitment that marginalized many newcomers who lacked strong connections or simply enough initiative (Bonfanti 2016). Some job opportunities other than agriculture emerged in that semi-urban corner of Italy where Param had found accommodation through another network of co-ethnics. Brescia is the most industrialized mid-size city in the Lombardy region; for over a century, chemical and manufacturing activities, nowadays owned by multinational companies, have thrived in town—on the one hand, causing serious environmental degradation, but, on the other, ensuring a changeable proletariat with the means to survive beyond bare necessities. The city has been a stronghold of trade unions and social activism (Bertelli 2019), which have learned on the ground how to contest the drifts of a racialized capitalism (Virdee 2019) and agitate for equal treatment of workers, regardless of color or any other difference.

After trotting around the area in several small firms, here as a fork-lifter, there as a welder (where he nearly lost two fingers in a careless accident at the end of a night shift), Param managed to get a temporary post in the assembly line of Brescia's prime homeware industry. Ideal Standard International is a privately held multinational bathroom, sanitary ware, and plumb-

ing fixture company headquartered in Belgium. Founded in the early twentieth century, by the late forties, the company was the main supplier of such homeware across Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Although some downsizing and outsourcing to Eastern Europe had affected this sector beginning in the nineties, the local Ideal Standard plant continued to draw its workforce from a pool of low-skilled transnational young immigrants; some left early, while others stayed and grew old on the job. Param learned to assemble steel taps into ceramic basins and to communicate as much as needed with his chiefs (Italian natives) and his workmates, who were mostly from Hindustan, Maghreb and Senegal. As soon as he signed an indefinite contract, 11 years after his arrival in Italy, he filed for family reunification and went in search of an appropriate place for his loved ones to dwell.

Heading for Europe, Param had left his wife, Ratna, and two children, Kiran and Deepti, back in the homeland. Kiran and Deepti, elder brother and younger sister, respectively, just one year apart, were barely toddlers when their father left and could not hold on to any memories other than the stories they heard from their mother and relatives and the few packages their father sent them. Param's permanent occupation was the key to multiplying the scarce amount he had been able to remit to his family for years. He now sent a sustained cash flow to his elder brother, who vowed to redistribute it to Param's wife and kids, and to invest it in the construction of a superior house on the ground plots that their deceased father had owned. Remittances and house development in the homeland were one side of the coin of this Punjabi man's mobility that was apparently working out as once planned, in line with the mobility aspirations of his co-ethnic cohort. The allure of *khoti* villas (modern mansions in the countryside that display the success achieved by a Punjabi abroad) is tied to the struggles of their owners living in the West, who often sacrifice their lives to working extra shifts or to drowning in financial indebtedness, as long as their dream

remittance houses are built in the villages they left behind (Aalbers 2016).

Beyond ordinary wear-and-tear: The breakdown

Although I learned of Param's hardships as a lonely emigrant and troubled immigrant through the secondary narratives provided by his children and wife (the stroke hit him three years before we met), on several occasions his loved ones did recount the toils that each went through once the *paterfamilias* had reunited them. Kiran remembers the exact date of his transfer to Italy, with his mother and younger sister: the summer evening he put his foot on the Italian soil, landing in Milano Malpensa, sniffing the breeze of a country he had only imagined at every unwrapping of the packages his father used to dispatch. He was almost 14, and Deepti was 12. The sense of emotional displacement that raged through their memories was part and parcel of the first few years in middle school: ex-officio, both were sent to classes with schoolmates one year younger in order to learn the language and then partake in content lessons. As the siblings recount, more than linguistic incompetence, "race" was their selective trait: brown skin color and a cheap outlook "whiffing curry" (Kiran would add, with an ironic prick) set them apart in their early peer interactions. Like thousands other children of immigrants in Italy at that time, their everyday life was not all doom and gloom (Seeberg and Goździak 2016); bitter-sweet friendship bonds and teenage experiences accompanied their progress into high school as well as relationships with co-ethnics and locals in a city that kept on diversifying in terms of culture, ethnicity, and religion, thanks to the soaring rate of incoming transnational migrants (Bertelli 2019). Both siblings were quite reflective about their adolescence as Italians in the making and immigrants from India, regardless of their will. "We never had a say in leaving the village and joining our father in Brescia . . . we assumed that this was everyone's expectation

and that it would work out just fine," Deepti said, sounding assertive. Yet, the stark reality of school disadvantages and being negatively stereotyped added distress to their teenage years, along with the pity and rage they both felt for their homebound mother. Ratna's inability to speak Italian, and the lack of services offered to newly arrived immigrant women, as well as her habitus of being the homemaker, made her settle with little choice other than staying at home, caring for the family, and offering cheap sewing repairs to some co-ethnic women.

When our informal conversations took off, Param and Ratna's children were adamant in framing their upbringing in migrancy as one of everyday wear-and-tear, between chances given and opportunities lost. Within such chronic uncertainty, the leeway for studying up to higher levels and to determine their best course for employment (a reasoning that ran parallel to their "native" Italian mates, besides the ethnic conundrum of South Asian early marriages) revealed its pitfalls just as their personal prospects collided with an unexpected event. Only when their father "fell down flat" (as their mother repeated as a grieving cliché) did the two siblings, then in their early twenties, realize that their roles and scenarios had always been significantly gendered also within the home and that the ingrained *householding* called for sensible intervention. Normative expectations in a Punjabi family require the adult children to play specific gendered roles: daughters to marry out soon, and sons (especially the eldest) to make a career and support their aging parents (Bonfanti 2015; Mand 2008). As we shall see, Param's household did conform to those rules, although his misfortune disrupted the normality of their family cycle.

A case for affliction: Socially added burdens to disability

Param had a stroke, or cerebrovascular accident (CVA, as stated in the medical reports his wife showed me, opening a thick folder religiously safeguarded in a cabinet in their master bed-

room) as he was resuming his shift at work after a lunch break on an April afternoon in 2014. By then, he had lived in Italy, breaking his back for 24 years—and he was yet to turn 55. The collapse of this family man also reveals the paradox of the “healthy immigrant effect” (Kristiansen et al. 2016). Transnational laborers, whose good health is critical to initiate and sustain a migratory project, risk to see their wellbeing deteriorate in time, due to chronic strains that may eventually “crash down like thunder.” In Ratna’s ritual sobbing (often on Sundays, when their trips to the nearby *gurdwara* had become rarer), expressions of grief combined with anger against a *karma* tinged by the global political economy. To his spouse, it was clear that Param’s physical exhaustion was not an accidental curse but the actual embodiment of an existential depletion that had ravaged his mind, extending its claws into his loved ones. Even though Ratna was very pragmatic, one night, after a long call with her sister-in-law, she attempted to provide a sensible explanation for her husband’s breakdown. As a Sikh woman who had grown up in India and still found solace in her diasporic cultural repertoire, Ratna believed that either *karma* (one’s deeds in a previous life) or *nazar* (someone’s evil eye) might have had an influence on Param’s misfortune. One day she maliciously attributed jealousy to kinsmen left in Punjab; the next, she would renounce all superstition and pray for a better life for herself and her loved ones who were atoning enough in the present day. The studies conducted by Veena Das (2015) in Delhi slums inaugurated a novel approach to understanding the trajectories of health and disease in the context of poverty, combining the existential with the ethical dimension of vulnerability. Arguing about “social affliction,” Das wondered: how could one’s physical collapse and its aftermath be re-absorbed within the everyday normal without straining one’s resources, relationships, and hopes beyond their limits?

Although I visited this family regularly for three years—conversing with whomever was available, tuning in to their respective daily

grinds, and aiding with errands or paperwork—communicating with the aging parents was neither easy nor smooth. Ratna has always been an affable woman, but her grasp of Italian was (and remains) weak. Even though she was fond of me (always insisting I took with me some of the food she had made), I never had a chance to interview this rapidly aging woman away from the presence of her children, who easily took up the role of “cultural brokers” (Garcia-Sanchez 2018). In the whirlwind of translation from Punjabi to Italian, through English, the mediation of another family member felt indispensable whenever approaching Param, who had lost phonological control after his stroke. Although Param was impaired in his motor functions and required a wheelchair to be taken around, his family had learned to deal with his communication impairment and establish a functional interaction, to which the man responded by alternating moaning with grateful blinks.

“If the body in health offers a model of organic wholeness, the body in sickness offers a model of social disharmony, conflicts and disintegration” (Schepher-Hughes and Lock 1987: 7). The infirmity of the householder was a ceaseless reminder that something had gone astray in the family’s plans; it was the living proof that a labor migrant’s body was a working capital susceptible to harm and that the projections of “motility” (holding to migration and social betterment; Leivestad 2016) that were built upon it were equally frail but resistant. Becoming accustomed to the collapse of their “big man” required continuous stamina, and not even I, a fleeting guest, ever came to terms with seeing Param, who once stood more than six feet tall (like many photos scattered around the house re-staged, memories of glee times lost) folded on himself, dragged in and out of his wheelchair morning and evening, with Kiran only being able to hold him when time for showering came. In fact, the bathroom fixtures were the practical reason for which the family, put on a reserve list for public housing by the local welfare, were offered no other residential alternative than moving to infamous San Polo.

Drawing from Rogaly's accounts of the housing benefits in contemporary Britain (Rogaly 2015), structural processes are at work in the allocation of "council estate apartments" for the dispossessed. Those who have lost their income (and entitlement to the middle-class dream) are vulnerable to persistent social inequality and spatial injustice. As an artifact of political control, Param's disabled body was an engine failure in the global gears of industrial production (Domnich et al. 2012; Kristiansen et al. 2016). A migrant laborer who couldn't work anymore could be easily displaced. In exchange for an elevator, larger doorway, and shower stall fitted for a wheelchair (ironically labeled "Ideal Standard" and likely manufactured at the same plant where Param worked and fell ill), the family was relocated to the east side of the city. The block featured residential towers built to accommodate a floating needy and displaced population, in a suburban belt "where botched dreams piled up," according to one of the apartment managers I once interviewed.



FIGURE 1. Inside an Ideal Standard home. Photo by the author

Housing and dwelling on the fringes of Europe

The relocation of Param's family after his stroke sheds light on the intersection between migration and housing research, homemaking and metropolitan dynamics (Hadjyanni 2019; Pozzi et al. 2019; Rogaly and Qureshi 2013). Social housing is the final destination of multiple shifts that the family underwent since their reunion in Italy. Following their transnational transfer from South Asia to Europe, their stay was punctuated by recurrent mobilities within the city of residence, as if homemaking remained on the move despite permanent settlement (and the Italian citizenship all family members gained following their father's naturalization). Looking at the home shifts of an immigrant household means to consider the interplay of private and public spaces, as well as the complex relations between disadvantaged neighborhoods and precarious communities, wherein the geographies of class and race often coalesce (Anderson 2012; Soja 2009).

Brescia's suburbs underwent serial conversions in the twentieth century. The current metropolitan layout has been bound to the social diversification led by labor migration trends since the seventies (Bertelli 2019). The West End was Param's first stopover after he moved to the city applying for jobs. The area has been densely inhabited since the early twentieth century, hosting the first and second waves of industrialization: textile manufactories came first, then chemical, mechanical, and automotive industries after World War II. To accommodate a swelling proletariat mass, common residential estates sprung up. By the nineties, as local industries began to close down (unable to face the global market competition), housing prices dropped and hundreds of immigrants occupied the area just as an environmental disaster occurred. From a nearby chemical plant, soil and water waste with toxic pesticides severely polluted the West End, which still awaits "brown field site clearance." Most residents never left, despite the health hazards, unable to afford mov-

ing elsewhere. In fact, a stroll along Via Milano reveals an *ethnicized* neighborhood: from *halal* butcher shops to beauty parlors, *desi* fashion stores to diners, any business here speaks Punjabi first. Via Milano is a broad avenue stretching for three miles that has long been known as “Mini-Punjab.” This used to designate a single condominium, where dozens of Punjabis lived in cramped conditions (mostly young males sharing) under a co-ethnic racketeering, until a city ordinance knocked the place down in 2011 and sparked an abrupt dispersal of irregular migrants.

For Italian Punjabis to achieve financial security—which is often tied to owning rental properties in the country of settlement—and possibly backing remittance houses for dreamed-of returns to the homeland (Taylor 2013), there must be certain conditions that permit some to prosper at the expense of others. Param dwelt in Brescia’s Mini-Punjab (the condo) for four years and brought his family there (the area) for another three. Although the role of *dalals* or business facilitators in diaspora networks has been reported in relation to the labor market (or to the passage from Asia to the West), there is scarce

literature available on the trade that self-made middlemen perform as estate agents in this corrupt housing system (see also Alexander 2011 on Bangladeshis in London). The critical accounts that Kiran and Deepti render of the place make explicit how living with insecurity can straddle the fine line between belonging and alienation, relying on familiar customs or else falling prey to them. Relocated to Italy, Kiran and Deepti grew up with their parents in Via Milano, in an apartment—already arranged with tarnished furniture—that the two siblings used to call “the lodge” and describe as “fiddly.” Being tenants in a flat let by people from Punjab like themselves seemed to respond to their quest for a sense of home left behind—that is, until exploitative intra-ethnic dynamics came into play. Although it was the first place where the reunited family lived together under one roof, there was no privacy, as Kiran recounted 10 years later:

We paid a small rent for the place, but every now and then, the landlord would impose on us to host other people, strangers to us. People whom he owed favors to.



FIGURE 2. Brescia’s Mini-Punjab. Photo by the Author

My mother was getting distressed, and as soon as we could, we moved out and my father rented another flat in the outskirts: out of the grasp of that *beehive*.

Social welfare, immigrant integration, “the right to a provincial city”?

The reluctant recollection of that first ill-advised dwelling in Italy cleared up when my young informants’ narration proceeded to their next, long-term “proper house” where they all moved in 2005. Leaving Via Milano farther westward into the countryside edging the city, there sits Villaggio Badia—lit. “Abbey Village”—a quarter that developed around the local friars’ abbey in the nineteenth century, until receiving formal recognition as urban settlement in the sixties when it underwent systematic re-planning to fill the criteria for “Family Neighborhood” (see also Low and Iveson 2016). Ratna joined the chorus of mellow memories of living in that area, where the few other immigrants were welcomed by the local residents in a spirit of “mutual tolerance,” which resonated with what it meant to have a decent “home away from home” for a Punjabi diaspora family. Their terraced house was a fine *pardesh makan*¹ (house abroad), which Ratna enjoyed, with a community garden where she could grow the crops that brought India back to life on her family’s plates. Deepti could still conjure a detailed description of their “little orchard”:

I cannot say it was an *oasis*, the climate doesn’t allow it to have a lush garden here . . . but we had rose bushes that our aged neighbor tended, and then the aromatic trees that only Mughals [Indian royals] cultivate! Sometimes, when I skipped down the stony steps, it almost felt like being back in the village [in Punjab]. . . . How do I miss *those days*!

Deepti’s memories blended places and temporalities, infancy and adolescence, nostalgia for Punjab and homemaking in Italy. From there,

her family’s aspirations ran smoothly for a few years: cash was remitted back to the home village in India, with no apparent doubts or silent desires. By the time her father fell sick, though, Deepti had already left that house. The young woman had married the previous summer, and after a few months living with her in-laws—patrilocal residence is still rather common for newlyweds in the Punjabi diaspora (Bonfanti 2020)—as soon as Deepti became pregnant, her husband rented another flat for just the two of them in a nearby town (thanks also to Param’s wedding gift). But when Param, the man of the family, became disabled overnight, the spell of hope seemed broken.

The family was put on a rolling list for social housing, and their long obtained Italian citizenship assured a speedier procedure: in two months, Kiran and his parents were relocated eastside, with other thousands whose bare lives are perceived as a blight on urban landscapes (Appadurai 2013). At the Bureau of Home and Inclusion, San Polo’s iconic skyscrapers were depicted as social havoc: a ghetto stricken by lack of maintenance and occasional wreckage, interracial fights and illegal dealings. Allocated a drab flat on the eleventh floor, Kiran took to inviting me home when his aged parents returned to India, staying in their (unfinished) remittance house in the wintertime. Deserted for nine months a year, their *khoti* villa looms as the phantom of a family that moved out but could never return as triumphantly as they had wished. Other relatives come to help, checking on the Nepali farmers who are in charge of the land Param still owns there (a plot that gets smaller year after year, as the landholder is pushed to sell out what he can’t profit from). One late March afternoon, Kiran and I sit on his balcony in Brescia San Polo gazing away; he likes taking pictures of the sun setting. He pauses for a grave comment:

Only the view of the city is what is left for us to enjoy! The further you can see in the distance from here, the further you are away from being where life counts. . . .

I've spent the first half of my life in India and now more than that in Italy, but I do not feel home neither here nor there anymore. . . . There's something I miss out on, and it's not a house, it's a *home place* that I can call as such.

Kiran sobs for the public invisibility to which his family was banished, and the private sense of defeat for his parents' generation who lost their future along the way of a grand migration project. His father's suffering out there in the sticks is only the tip of a drama that binds together poverty and racial exclusion (Herzog 2020). Even though the aerial view stretched uninterrupted over the city, with glass and copper shimmering in the background "from the financial quarter and the classy domes," Kiran lets his aspirations fall back down to earth. In moving from the East to the West of the globe, his father had sought a better home, in shifting

from the city's west side to its east side, his family home went from (aspiring) riches to rags. Although my friend recognizes the ambivalent sense of compensation and experience of displacement that their council estate apartment yielded, it would be misleading to report only complaints from the beneficiaries of public housing (Bottero 2019). When we go back inside, he directs my attention to his mother's potted plants. He has fixed a small treehouse on the balcony's threshold; cheap polycarbonate materials work just as well as glass for growing cardamom and tulsi seeds. Even where living conditions may not be ideal, constant maintenance can make houses and people stand their ground despite adversities. There is a "sense of possibility" that mother and son live by every day, which renders that contested house a place where life is still manageable nonetheless and where home may be achievable again (Stepputat 2009).



FIGURE 3. Snap-shooting on the eleventh floor. Photo by the author

Bouncing back: Who holds the family now?

Param's incapacitated body sat as a metaphor of the disrupted plan for making a family life worth living after migration. Seeing the carousel of interventions that followed the man's physical collapse, we ought to look not only at the welfare scenario and compensation to a worker who could no longer work but also at the response that came from his loved ones—once dependent on him but now responsible to make ends meet and care for a fallen breadwinner. To the politics of care provided by the state, which did not abandon them but did set them aside (Povinelli 2011), the family added an ethic of care that was far from granted. Following Cheryl Mattingly (2014), how could one best attain a virtuous “good” life in spite of the limits and strains that chronically ill and disabled family members may face? In what ways do the ethics of intimate care become a source of contention, experimentation and possibility? In reconstituting a space of health at home (Dyck and Dossa 2007), the redistribution of commitments challenged the transmission of authority within the household and called into question received notions of rights and duties as well as gender and generational roles.

Although Param was offered residential care in a nursing home, Ratna never considered living apart from her husband. A voluntary nurse came around once a week, but the family was in charge of everyday care. Activities included mobility assistance, bathing, incontinence care, special meals preparation, medicine reminders, and transportation to check-ups. It became Ratna's mission to ensure that their house was the best place for her debilitated husband to live, and it was almost a second job to Kiran. Financial constraints had required the young man to abandon the idea of attaining a master's degree. In a time of economic recession, when youth unemployment was at its peak, Kiran felt fortunate enough just to step up his technical job from a part-time to full-time position. Residing a few miles away, Deepti's engagement with the

family practicalities was more discontinuous. Although she rarely commented on her father's disability, between personal reserve and desire to avoid the situation, one day she let her sorrow slip out:

My brother and I always looked up to *Papaji* when we were kids, we were kind of afraid of him, you know. And now the best we can do is to look after him! . . . I find it hard to look down on my father when I enter the door: I often rush to the first chair so that I can meet his eyes at the same level.

When I observed that her father's infirmity might have contributed to redefining *reciprocity* in the home, Deepti interrupted me: since her father needed 24/7 care, his apparent weakness did not make him equal to the rest of the family; it was still a form of tyranny although restored otherwise. Param had been the decision-maker for his wife and children before his stroke; and now that he could no longer impose his own will on them, his chronic illness commanded them instead. His daughter's frustration revealed that the labor of care at home is a politics of affection that entails fatigue, grudges, and regrets.

While Deepti was busy raising her toddler with her husband, her parents were anxious for another young woman to come and help in their home. “Raising a daughter is like flowering your neighbor's plants” is a laconic adage that I've often heard from Indian women. In accounting for sex discrimination in North India, Ravinder Kaur (2008: 109) comments: “Daughters may not be wanted, but daughters-in-law are necessary for family wellbeing and perpetuation. . . . Similarly not all sons receive an equal treatment, and those who are left bachelors have a lesser fate.” Although mutual affection was never questioned in her home, Deepti acknowledged that she could only exert her caring agency as far as the moral economy of a Punjabi household allowed. If anyone's vulnerability is an embodied condition embedded in multiple networks, resilience is just as gen-

dered and conditional (Das 2014). In the effort of home keeping, everyday practices revealed an intersection of positions and hierarchies across genders and generations—family life is a moral laboratory indeed (Mattingly 2014). Even between the two siblings, who were only a year apart and close growing up, their father's misfortune incited subtle rivalries and rifts. Deepti had rushed into a semi-arranged marriage, persuading her parents that she would fare better with a (Punjabi-born) boyfriend met in Italy rather than with a stranger recruited from India (under the scheme of arranged marriages, Bonfanti 2015, 2020). Meanwhile, Kiran struggled to defend his bachelor status. He might hold the house in practical and financial terms, but the baton would not pass on to him until a daughter-in-law came to the house. The martial title of *Sardar* (chief), as the Sikhs address a family head within the normative discourse of patriarchy, does not (yet) appeal to him. The role of breadwinner learned from his father is hard to emulate. The times have changed, and even those who dwell together day after day understand different registers of temporality.

House-lives across generations

Param's stroke occurred while his children were transitioning to adulthood, yet that critical event also reaffirmed the parental process of aging and the natural expectations of decaying life. Accounting for the low take-up of social services by Asian elders, Kanval Mand (2008) drew attention to the public discourses that construe South Asian families in Britain as "looking after their own" within a moral economy where care for the elderly takes place in the home. Although no similar debates have started in Italy for (more recently immigrated) South Asians, Param and Ratna represent the first generation who have raised their offspring in the country and are now growing old among different social provisions and cultural practices. Being in their late fifties, their narratives of age and migration are not merely retrospective (Gardner 2020). The couple does not only look back on their past

but also looks at their future with a new mind-set; their original plan to return to India in late age has shifted to an annual winter migration. In the homeland, the remittance house envisaged by Param was never completed due to lack of funding. In the adoptive country, their adult children intend to remain in Italy, and Ratna won't leave either. After all, Brescia is where her children live and where welfare and medical care² for the vulnerable are within reach. Deepti and Kiran agree with their mother's intentions and feel rather nervous whenever their parents depart for India. They wonder: "will they be safe"?

Since the pandemic broke out, Kiran and I have kept in touch from a distance. As new anti-COVID rules were being enforced, his calls became restive. Within two weeks, Kiran first informed me, gasping with anxiety, that he would get married next month; later, with a sigh of relief, he reported that the marriage had been put on hold indefinitely. Although the pandemic often prevented their encounters (both still lived with their respective parents), Kiran had been dating a second-generation Indian woman for a year. Despite his hesitancy, his girlfriend and both their families put great pressure on him to take the plunge and wed. For a man in his thirties with a decent job, it was high time to settle down—that is, find a spouse, start a family of his own, and ensure this kin alliance was appropriate—and who better than a co-ethnic immigrant young woman, with suitable caste-cum-class background, to meet his parents' approval as a much-needed daughter-in-law? I had often spoken with South Asian youths about the ambivalences of marriage arrangements in their extended kin networks, where prospective brides (and grooms) did have different degrees of choice (Bonfanti 2015). Deepti herself was a case in point. Kiran had eschewed an arbitrary marriage combined by his relatives in the homeland years earlier, and when he had apparently landed a loving relationship with a girl born in India but raised in Italy—like himself—a throbbing sensation stuck with him. As Manpreet Jajaja and Andreas Bandak (2018) argue, the

drive behind people's agency, whether coming to fulfillment or not, may also include mindful delay: instead of rushing into uncertain futures, the more we feel we may risk losing what is already precariously held, the more we move at a snail's pace until we get *what is worth the wait*. Kiran's marriage delay also speaks back to the emergent literature on practices of *waithood* in the twenty-first century, wherein the youth's aspirations for higher education and steadier jobs collide with the demanding prospects of conjugal relations and childbearing (Inhorn et al. 2020). As the son of a South Asian labor immigrant whose Italian naturalization does not yet qualify him as an equal subject—whether in the job or the marriage market (race and class still disadvantaging him)—Kiran is searching not only to survive but also possibly to thrive, despite his father's frailty and their household uncertainty, for which he feels—and is—responsible by now. Following Ghassan Hage (2009), the young man's sense of *stuckedness* was also "a waiting out of the crisis": an ongoing apprenticeship of how to navigate the impoverished condition of racialized second generations in Italy, in the face of a governmentality that reinforced their marginal status. Nonetheless, my friend has not lost faith in the middle-class dream (Weiss 2019). If his father's transnational labor migration had served to advance his children's horizons, then he still believed that upward social mobility could come, out of the model of modern Indian minorities (Saran 2015), for whom higher education is paramount. He has not given up on gaining a master's degree and working his way up to a better social position; the time was merely not yet ripe.

Conclusions

In her discussion of "house-lives," Janet Carsten (2018) unpacked the entanglements that tie together houses—as well as the lives lived within them and the wider social contexts where experiences of home are shaped. In this article, which follows the ebbs of and flows of one family's

life (and individual lives), I sought to consider the intersection of biography and ethnography from the vantage point of a home on the move in both time and space: a place to remember, inhabit, and look for all at once (Williksen and Rapport 2020). By means of home visits and life narratives, the longitudinal ethnography conducted with(in) this household became a genealogical case (Bonfanti 2020; Ketil Simonsen et al. 2017). Sharing their struggles at home, my informants guided me through the existential passing of time: in their repetitive every day within a non-linear accommodation in the country of settlement, amid individual memories and projections. Moreover, their household history shed light on different temporalities of migration: the patterns of Punjabi transnational labor, family reunification, and the journey to citizenship for the second generation.

On one hand, the genealogical case just explored not only confirms the role of memory and narratives in understanding migrant family life (and individual lives within it); it also suggests how kin use those narratives to lend coherence to their homemaking projects (or lament their disruption). This methodological reflection facilitates a shift in perspective: from nigh-unattainable visions of home to people putting their intentions to work in the world (Cangià and Zittoun 2020).

On another hand, from a global perspective attentive to the political-economic conditions that constrain transnational migration, this ethnographic study tried to reason with how the temporalities of neoliberalism affect the lives of migrant working classes (see also Gardiner Barber and Lem 2018). The case analyzed here acknowledges that contemporary exploitative labor dynamics (and their racialization) impinge on the rhythm of people's lives (Bottero 2019). At the same time though, the agency of the research subjects is given prime relief notwithstanding their evident physical and social vulnerabilities.

This article is based on my long-term ethnography in a super-diverse urban context and on extended narrative work with a multigener-

ational migrant family who allowed me to enter their domestic spaces both physically and figuratively (with different margins of intimacy and collaboration; Bonfanti, forthcoming). Considering the durability of relationships and the ephemerality of moments that are woven into the texture of everyday life, I sought to account for the politics of care that this household developed after being laid low by sudden disability and poverty, in order to sustain their collective migration project. Although I did recognize the social suffering experienced by my interlocutors at different levels, including public invisibility, I intend this article to be more than mere commentary (Ong-Van-Cung 2013). Quoting Das (2015: 17–18): “The greatest challenge to me is to find a way to make my prose commensurate with the sense of endurance I found among the people struggling to secure everyday life.” In writing of their lives, I hope to have upheld the same care and respect my interlocutors put into mending their household, alongside the mutual commitment we shared for cultivating a meaningful human relationship.

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Notes

1. While the Punjabi word “ghar” refers to one’s *home* in relational terms (Bonfanti 2018), the unusual expression “pardes makan” denotes detachment from a *house* where one lives in a foreign land.
2. Since double nationality is not allowed in India, being naturalized Italian came at the expense of resigning their former Indian citizenship (Lal and Jacobsen 2016). Now holding an Italian passport and an OCI visa (Overseas Citizens of India), the legal status of all family members leaned over to the side of their country of residence.

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